Aino

“Alright, shaman!” a gruff voice announced itself before the hand that clapped Aino’s shoulder. It belonged to Deckard, one of the Round Table's fixers, and Aino’s favourite. He had a habit of tipping her off to the sweetest upcoming contracts, all because she’d done him a favour a while ago with some spirit problems. “Have you run into the new wizkid that started taking on contracts around here lately?”

Aino quirked an eyebrow, “why do you ask? …and wait, *kid* as in teenager?”

“Hark you, miss barely-not-a-teenager! -but yeah, I had my doubts too, except the spellworms on the lords’ payroll say he’s good, so-” Deckard shrugged, as though it wasn't very much his business, and slid into the booth across from her, “what it is, is, it’s another Scandi - even looks just like you, mun!”

Well, that could be cause for concern, if not for the fact that all her living siblings were older than her, but young enough that most of their kids wouldn't be adolescent yet. So the odds that it was family… “Is this how we find out that you can't tell humans apart if they have the same skin and hair colour?” Aino joked to dispel her uneasiness.

“Funny, no,” Deckard’s wry smile accentuated his crooked tusk, “it’s all in the face. I couldn’t even tell you what colour his hair is.”

She tapped her fingers on the table, “and where’s he from specifically?”

“I don’t right know, I didn’t ask, did I?” Deckard replied, casual.

“Suppose you can’t tell me what kind of runs he’s been accepting,” Aino surmised, matching his casual tone.

“Spot on,” he leaned back in the booth, putting his thick hands behind his head.

Aino hummed, having expected that answer, “I guess I’ll keep an eye out, then.”

“You should drop by the cathedral tomorrow; I heard the squires are looking to muscle up for a forecasted heatwave. New guy might be there,” Deckard suggested, in a tone of feigned disinterest that told Aino he was actually very curious to see the outcome.

“Maybe I will,” she conceded, not committing to a course of action straight away. Deckard had never intentionally steered her wrong so far, and they were on pretty good social terms, but you never made the mistake of thinking the fixer was your friend.

It wasn’t like she was hurting for credits at the moment, she could afford to think it over first.

“Terminal!” Deckard declared, pleased even in spite of her ambivalence, “it sounds like good work for you. Oh, but avoid the septic if you do. He’s an absolute slint, he is.”

“I can handle some Round Table creep,” Aino groused defiantly, crossing her arms over her chest. Far from her to deliberately invite trouble, but if he tried anything, he’d get what was

coming to him. She wasn't going to be intimidated by boys running around LARPing as Arthurian nobility. There was still time for them to learn actions had consequences.

"I was just warning you, don't go getting your knickers in a twist," said Deckard good-naturedly.

"My knickers are not in a twist."

"Your mug says otherwise, so you should fix that."

"Your sideburns are uneven; how about you fix *that*," Aino rebutted, unable to suppress the crooked little smile the banter brought to her face.

Deckard laughed, smoothing over one sideburn absent-mindedly, "fair do's." That seemed to conclude things, because he got up from the table, and said with a wink, "alright, I have to be off, then. Other biz to get sorted; other runner pubs to be trawled. Don't catch any static, my squishy dwt shaman."

"Bye, you big lez!" Aino called after his retreating back.

She lingered for a while longer, people-watching until the crowds of patrons began to thin. The walk back to the bunkhouse in the cold evening air would be brisk, and the atmosphere indoors was warm. Eventually, she could no longer deny that it was getting very late. Tomorrow would come with or without her, and it would come kindlier with sleep.

Pulling her buff up over her nose, she stepped out onto the streets of Cardiff. It was never dark here. City lights lit up the urban landscape, and the sky had an eerie glow unlike anything she'd seen growing up. The sounds of nightlife had been jarring to her at first, too, but she'd come to appreciate the noise. Drunks talking and laughing, the click of a lighter, the rumble of a taxi cab engine, the buzzing of the electric sign over a chop shop.

She went from the open main sprawl, to covered alleyways packed with shops, then down narrow brick squeezes where the people had etched out a living crammed amid existing structures, and finally the bunkhouse road.

Aino slipped quietly into her shared room and under the covers. The novelty of a real mattress and a heated room still hadn't worn off, long after she thought it would. In no time, twin snores from the other bunks succeeded in lulling her to sleep.

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Shifting movement at the first light of dawn roused her from a dream. One of the women had gotten up, dressed herself, and gently cracked the door to leave. Aino couldn't remember what she'd dreamt about, but her cheeks were damp.

"Saana…?" she groggily whispered.

The voice of the mountain could be felt more than heard, a deep and clear thrumming through her very bones.
You went back to the lake, child. It has been a long time since last you did.

Aino dragged her hands through her hair and across her face, wiping it of tears. “It has been,” she concurred, glancing around to make sure she hadn’t woken anyone else, “hopefully that doesn’t mean anything.”

Fully awake now, she collected her gear from the locker she’d claimed in the corner of the room, against two makeshift shipping container walls. After a night to sleep on it, Aino had made up her mind about going to the cathedral. Maybe the new guy *would* be there, and, by lucky coincidence, she’d meet a fellow countryman who shared her language.
Then again, if he turned out to be an asshole, she could just as easily write him off.

She quickly showered before leaving the bunkhouse with her duffel bag full of gear. Retracing her steps from the evening before, she passed through the city centre and kept on walking until the Round Table’s meeting place greeted her. The air was heavy with fluff today, a bothersome sensation that clung to the back of her throat. Pollution resistance or lung enhancing wetware was always an option… as long as she didn’t mind becoming a burnout, that is... (She minded.)
Also, Saana would be disappointed in her.
The one silver lining was that no one questioned why anyone covered their face.

Inside the cathedral, she recognized the squires with ease by their laughable garb.

She caught a first mocking tone that said, “you really reckon snakeboy over there has what it takes? A stiff wind might knock him over - and besides, he *reeks*, mate.”

The American accent that piped up next brought Deckard’s warning to mind, “sure we’re not dealing with a snakegirl, rather? He doesn’t look very masculine to me.”

Aino looked around for the person they were talking about. Following the men’s line of sight, her gaze alighted on a scrawny dust-coloured figure leaning against one of the pillars. Shyness didn’t become her, so she figured she’d approach and introduce herself, maybe ask where he was from. Except… something made her halt her advance. She’d caught a glimpse of his face beneath his mop of filthy hair.

Vittu- he does look just like me! She thought, her stomach plummeting.

A part of her was too proud to beat a retreat now, but another knew that it wouldn’t have made a difference, because he’d already looked up. She could read the exact moment he noticed her from his body language, as he froze up like an animal trapped in a snare.

The wheels in her mind were spinning at a mile a minute. She found herself confronted with only one possibility, and it was an impossibility. “Who are you?” she demanded in brusque Finnish, overcome with the sense that she was exhibiting a childish sort of irrationality.

He stared back, briefly mute. His cutting regard seemed to be searching her for the answer to that question. Finally, he spoke, sounding confused, “Tuomo.”

“That’s impossible,” she snapped back, “Tuomo is dead.”

Aino felt the Round Table squires' eyes drilling into the back of her head. This conversation could not happen in the middle of the cathedral like this. She dragged him by the sleeve of his ratty, disgusting flat-jacket into one of the side alcoves. The fabric had already started to break down, and fibers came away in her hand. No one wore flats unless they were desperate.

"Explain yourself," she said, once they had a modicum more privacy.

"I don't know what to explain," he said, shaking his head, "I'm not dead."

I sense no lie, Saana rumbled, a low and unwavering rhythm, *the same magic flows in them as does in you. This is a child that grew up at my feet.*

"Mitä helvettiä…" Aino cursed. It couldn't be true, because she was the one who had pulled Tuomo to shore, the one who had held his small, cold body in her arms…
…Saana told her she'd dreamed of the lake last night.

Tuomo's glacial stare continued to scrutinize her. Was she mistaken, or did he also exhibit a mien of stunned disbelief? Hesitantly, he motioned with one curled finger for her to pull her buff down to her chin. Quashing the rising hysteria, she put the duffel aside and obliged.

"You… look like Aino," said Tuomo, a nonsensical statement.

"Of course I do," she spluttered, "I am Aino. Who else would I look like?"

He didn't answer immediately, as if at a loss for words. It was then that it dawned on her, she hadn't mentioned her name before now. He'd been the one to say it first. Somehow, although it defied all logic and common sense… this really was her little sibling. Had he truly not died? Had she not failed him after all?

Hands trembling, her heart swelled with equal parts grief and hope. All of a sudden, she needed to feel firm, warm flesh under her touch. She needed tangible proof that he was real and alive.

"How-" he started, only to have his budding question cut short.

Without thinking, she reached out to grip him, hands finding a place on either side of his head. Tuomo reactively recoiled, but not enough to pull from her grasp completely. Aino could feel the coarse, greasy texture of his hair and the warm skin under her thumb. At some point in the last decade he'd grown taller than her. She wondered when, exactly, that had happened. It seemed wrong. The Tuomo in her mind had always been littler than her, something in need of protection.

For some reason, that thought broke the dam, as she began to weep openly. She coiled her arms around his neck in a crushing hug, aware of the way he stiffened in discomfort. Yet, he didn't try to escape it.

Outside, the smog had partly cleared, allowing morning light to pass through the stained-glass windows, bathing the cathedral in colours that shimmered in the blurred reflection of her tears.

She only just managed to rein in her weeping before she exclaimed, "you smell so bad!" and burst into fresh sobs.

Fidgeting a bit, he replied, in a flat voice, “you don’t have to be hugging me.”

At that, she released him and stepped back, sniffling. “When’s the last time you took a shower?”

Pale blue eyes hastily slid away from hers, which was an answer in and of itself. Would her amazement at his survival never cease? “Whatever,” Aino said, setting that aside for later, “where are you staying?”

“Car park not far from here,” Tuomo said, still avoiding her gaze.

“Alright,” she heaved a weary sigh, and launched into problem-solving mode. “I don’t think there are any more spaces left at the bunkhouse, so once we’re done with this job, I’ll find us a hostel for the time being, okay?”

“Okay,” he repeated.

Now with a plan in mind, her sense of calm returned. She had long scorned fate, but it felt as though, for the first time in her life, it had given her a second chance to right her greatest wrong.

He’s a runner, her psyche helpfully reminded her, *you won’t be able to keep him out of danger.*

She knew very well that, were anything to happen, a miracle would not produce itself twice. One miracle would simply have to be enough. Aino could make it enough. Today, they had a plan, and tomorrow she’d make another, for as long as it took - until what, she didn’t know.
Maybe until they were finally out of the damn cabin in the woods.

Glossary

Burnout (n) – a mage who has lost too much of their essence to cyber-or-bioware enhancements
Chop shop (n) – unlicensed or kind of sketchy cyber-and-bioware establishment
Dwt (n/adj) – Welsh word meaning cute or wee, or a cute, wee thing
Fixer (n) – intermediate between an organisation and the runners it hires, often a broker of contacts and information by necessity as well
Flat/s (n) – inexpensive recycled clothing sold out of vending machines
Fluff (n) – pollution, polluted or bad weather
Heatwave (n) – police crackdown or raid
Mitä helvettiä – Finnish for "what the hell?"
Run (n) – shadowrun, contracted mercenary work
Runner (n) – shadowrunner, typically some kind of mercenary
Scandi (n/adj) – Scandinavian
Septic (n) – American (from "septic tank" which rhymes with "yank", originates from Aussie slang)
Slint (n) – creep (major)
Snakeboy/girl (n) – street kid
Spellworm (n) – mage (pejorative)
Static (n) – trouble
Squishy (n/adj) – somewhat derogatory term for non-orks and non-trolls
Terminal (adj) – positive exclamation equivalent to "brilliant"
Vittu (n) – Finnish exclamation equivalent to "fuck" (vulgar)
Wetware (n) – cyber-or-bioware, more often bioware
Wizkid (n) – a young mage, often a teenager